

Developing the pedagogy of generic doctoral support: strategic educational development

Authors: Susan Carter and Deborah Laurs

Institutions: The University of Auckland, New Zealand and Victoria University of Wellington, New Zealand.

Abstract

Generic doctoral skills is a flourishing new practice, yet very little scholarship has focussed on generic doctoral support's pedagogy. Here, backgrounded by case studies from several universities, qualitative data on practitioners' (N34) identification of criteria for good generic doctoral support begins the task of building its pedagogy. Seven themes identified in the data are discussed and then summarised as a benchmarking model, with attendees to the paper invited to offer their criteria.

Introduction

Increasingly doctoral supervision is complemented by generic doctoral support. Yet, although the provision of generic doctoral skills is a flourishing new practice, very little scholarship has focussed on generic doctoral support's pedagogy, particularly in comparison with attention given to supervision. However, generic support does equally important work in complementing supervision to alleviate the complex process whereby doctoral students develop a credible researcher identity (McAlpine & Amundsen, 2007). Thus students gain a more sophisticated understanding of their research an overview perspective, a meta-analysis of the whole doctoral process, and the generic requirements of the thesis (Carter & Laurs, 2014). Workshop discussions across disciplines makes epistemologies more apparent, while talk with peers allows students to more clearly articulate their own positionality.

Furthermore, generic support is the strongest option for addressing some of the challenges of doctoral education. Inductions to the doctorate mean that students enter programs with their eyes open. International students coping with unfamiliar cultural contexts (Cotterall, 2011) or whose first language is not English or students who lack confidence and motivation are frequently more comfortable learning how to overcome such challenges in a neutral generic environment outside of department politics and scrutiny. Help with issues that affect some students but not all, such as ethics committee applications, or statistical analysis, becomes fiscally viable when provided across campus: 'If particular skills are useful across a range of fields, then there may be efficiencies in regarding them as generic and teaching them as such' (Gilbert, Balatti, Turner & Whitehouse, 2004, p. 386). Similarly, it is possible across campus and even across institutions to foster equity for minority groups, such as indigenous people, who are currently significantly under-represented in doctoral success. Writing workshops focussing on the genre of the thesis — for example, its need to demonstrate critical analysis— supplement supervisory feedback relating to the discipline (Aitchison, Kamler & Lee, 2010). Furthermore, not all supervisors are good at giving clear feedback on writing (Paré, 2011), whereas those working from a generic position have expertise in this area (Barnacle & Dall'Alba, 2013). Generic support thus makes a healthy complement to discipline-specific advice.

Supervisory and generic pedagogies: a comparison

Because providers of generic doctoral support are more vulnerable than supervisors to restructuring (Clerehan, 2007), it is important that they begin to research, articulate and claim their work as an area of academic expertise or they risk the devolvement of their work. This paper came out of reflection on our recent publication *Developing Generic Support for Doctoral Students* (Carter & Laurs, 2014). Having both worked in different institutions providing generic support through campus-wide doctoral programs, we recognized that pedagogy for teaching doctoral students has, until now, almost exclusively focussed on the supervisory relationship.

Supervision was initially a practice with a huge power ratio discrepancy—suspected at times as being flawed, abusive, insensitive—yet the possibility of learning how to do it better seemed intrusive. It was a strictly private relationship, often described as taking place behind closed doors (suggesting somewhere torture is administered or illicit acts take place) or in a “secret garden” as Chris Park (2007) called it, which is more promising, although for some students find this garden a much-sought magical place with frustratingly limited access. For others, it becomes an overgrown wilderness full of prickly things.

Recently, however, researchers began to open these closed doors and investigate supervision. Supervisory teaching practice became discussed along with other types of teaching. Some really helpful material emerged (Delamont, Atkinson, & Parry, 1998; Denholm & Evans, 2007; Grant, 2010; Kamler & Thomson, 2006; Wisker, Robinson, Trafford, Warnes, & Creighton, 2003; Wisker, 2010), and we believe that Scholarship of Teaching and Learning research really has meant more attention being paid to supervisory practice, resulting in the likelihood of better supervision. Barbara Grant’s (2003) mapping of the pleasures and risks of supervision is useful as well as a pleasure to read in its own right—she digs round and notes the complexities of both students and supervisors, inflected, as Finke (1992) observes, by “the interests of race, class, gender, ethnicity, age, and any number of other related ‘accents’ [that] intersect each utterance” (p. 13). Students’ myriad needs and desires (Grant, 2003), coupled with supervisors’ own research agendas and institutional performance measures, all add unspoken pressures for the relationship to succeed.

The financial drive for good doctoral pedagogy

The lively interest in good supervision was partly due to the fairly recent acceptance by the world of the idea that we are in a *knowledge* economy. The importance of new knowledge has swung to its effect on economy, and the hope that, in any given gap in knowledge, there is money to be made. Thus there are two drivers governing universities’ doctoral programs: a desire for fairness, ethical behaviour, personal achievement, and the betterment of society; and a cold-blooded fiscal impulse for survival in a competitive corporate environment. Suddenly the huge gap in human knowledge is like a gold field and there is a gold rush on—governments want new knowledge, institutions and doctoral researchers work hard to generate more ‘output’, with some students travelling internationally in the process, risking their future by investing in education, and with some dropping by the wayside, or finding, at the end of four years, that they have less to show for their endurance than what they had hoped for. Other hardy survivors make good and get rich (at least metaphorically): as graduates they secure academic jobs or reasonably-paid research work.

We cannot afford for the wastage of high doctoral attrition, identified at the end of the previous century as around 50% (Lovitts, 1996, p. 1), which raises the question of how students can most efficiently be supported in order to recoup their gold for the institutional

weigh in? The institutional answer is usually multi-levelled, with increased compulsory supervisory training, smoother application processes, and better funding. Another avenue is booming around the world too: generic support supplied centrally.

Development of generic support

Now, generic programmes from the outset were radically different from supervision. Supervision has a longer history; generic support is relatively recent. Supervision was private, behind closed doors; generic teaching was right out in the open from inception. Generic sessions are overseen by a variety of stakeholders. Whereas supervision was private and specific, generic doctoral support is often designed by committees, and/or scrutinized by institutional agents. At the University of Auckland, New Zealand, for example, a committee of seven people spend over a year benchmarking, and looking at literature and seeking advice from various people in high places, including those responsible for quality control, as we put together a doctoral studies programme to launch in March 2007. A doctoral induction day became compulsory, augmented by a series of core and optional workshops covering key competencies such as critical analysis of literature, structure, style and voice in thesis writing, publication, careers preparation and others. Suddenly our Student Learning Centre was firmly on the institutional radar, and attendance numbers increased dramatically. We were also aware of being watched closely as we pieced together a strong programme.

The UK leadership role

With serious funding, the UK has had a head start in generic doctoral support. There, Sir Gareth Roberts, with his 2002 SET Report, set in motion a policy initiative that provided £120 million of new government funding over ten years to support the skills development of research students and postdoctoral research staff (Hodge 2010). That is a serious investment in the gold fields of new knowledge. Suddenly there was a burgeoning of new programmes teaching transferable skills, research skills, graduate attributes (Borthwick & Wissler, 2003)—the terminology was fluid but the drive energetic. Despite a new educational industry, during the energetic awareness of generic needs, just one book emerged, cautiously investigating politics and practice, *Skills Training in Research Degree Programmes: Politics and Practice* (Hinchcliffe, Bromley & Hutchinson, 2007). There were, however, longitudinal and extensive projects investigating doctoral experience and the outcome in their careers: Vitae has produced in-depth studies that have cast a guiding light for those of us outside of the UK working exclusively with doctoral students. Elsewhere in the world, we made use of the work in Europe, including both Bologna process and graduate attributes developments (see for example the Dublin Descriptors [European University Association, 2004]).

Unsurprisingly, in the UK there was also a national desire to try to evaluate whether all the effort and investment of generic support was showing results. However, this was not an easy task. Often with assessed course teaching you can link good student pass rates to stated teaching objectives and learning outcomes. Those of us providing generic support for doctoral students cannot do this. It is impossible to show that any single doctoral student or cohort of doctoral students had better success as a result of taking a generic course on project management (Bromfield, 2014, p. 154). There are simply too many factors contributing to completion rates of a degree undertaken over four years with multiple influences.

The problem

The question of evaluation continues to bother those involved in generic doctoral support. We can get student evaluations that arguably show students think our courses are of value because they learned something; we can accumulate unsolicited affirmations of our

effectiveness from individual students; we can show that our optional courses have increased attendance, suggesting word-of-mouth indicates they are worth attending; and teaching reviews showing our courses are well planned, well structured, and research informed. However, beyond this qualitative data it is less easy to show how we are making a difference to the quest for new knowledge in a knowledge economy.

There is a great deal of energy going into generic support, but much written on its pedagogy—which has both clear similarities to supervision and considerable difference. The gap in the literature adds to our vulnerability as a new academic precariate. Here, then, is what drives our argument:

- with generic support it is even harder than with supervision to show that the teaching is good, that it results in stronger researchers who are great producers, and that it is worth its cost;
- we are certain that generic support is great value for money in what it gives to students, supervisors, institutions and the research community;
- we are aware of the sorts of doctoral teaching that are better done, or only able to be done, generically; and
- we are launching a call for more discourse on our pedagogy and practices; clearer recognition of best practice in supervisor/learning advisor complementarity; and more consideration of how we can show our value as teachers to institutions who are anxious about money and hell-bent on change, sometimes seemingly for its own sake.

The book we have produced is multi-voiced and pulls together an impressive line-up of international experts working with generic support. It begins with the context of generic support's inception. Then it looks at how generic support has developed in response to student requirements, in acknowledgement of equity, values and identity regarding historically-marginalised groups, and the needs of students writing their thesis in English when this is not their first language. It hones in to show how critical thinking and skills with accurate descriptions can be taught generically. Two chapters cover support for writing, core business for generic learning advisors.

The final third of the book considers sustainability. The role of generic support for increasing numbers of part-time doctoral students means sometimes providing out-of-hours events for people who have full time jobs or family care responsibilities, and often extending to providing strong digital support that allows these students to build peer support communities of practice, with blogs such as *The Thesis Whisperer*, *Patter* and the *Doctoral Writing SIG* offering the further possibility of international support. Generic support that prepares doctoral students for their future careers is also addressed, particularly in terms of how it supplements essential backing from supervisors. Then a final chapter considers that most difficult and troublesome topic, evaluation of generic support.

Because in the UK they have looked at this question from a great many angles, we invited Tony Bromley, the lead researcher on the *RugbyTeam Impact Framework* (Bromley & Metcalf, 2008; Bromley, Metcalf & Park, 2012), to contribute to our discussion of assessment. He brought his summation after years of investigation, puzzling, and talking with other educationalists at different levels across the nation.

It is helpful for those of us working in smaller countries with less national funding to realize that after a great effort of investigation the answer really is not easy. Evidence cannot be gathered quickly. Nor can it be done statistically with any rigour regarding causality. Bean

counters love figures, but statistics do not show that my teaching was the *direct cause* of improvement. In any triangulation of data, qualitative data plays a central role. The task remains to convince stakeholders that what cannot be shown in numbers is still essential work that contributes value to institutions.

A term that has been appropriated from the courts of law is ‘beyond reasonable doubt’ — doctoral learning advisors may build a case by triangulating student evaluations and unsolicited comments from academics who notice our influence, improved completion figures, and increases in attendance at optional workshops (Bromley, 2014, p. 149) . It is not as good as having the figures that might convince those bean-counters, the equivalent of the court’s conclusive DNA or fingerprints, but such evidence still has merit when carefully fitted into a case for the defence.

Method

It seemed to us that it would be helpful to develop another tool that might form part of our case showing value ‘beyond reasonable doubt.’ To do so, we emailed contributors to *Developing Generic Support for Doctoral Students* to ask for their descriptors of a good generic programme or workshop. We received a total of 34 responses from experienced practitioners, people whose teaching and research focuses on doctoral pedagogy and in many cases particularly on generic doctoral support.

The results were then thematically categorized: we both scrutinized them separately and found that we were in agreement on the themes that emerged. Seven criteria came through as important. One contributor noted that generic pedagogy is about ‘much *more* than transferable skills’; the list of criteria from our data teases out the elements of good pedagogy for doctoral support (see too Golde, Jones, Conklin Bueschel & Walker, 2006).

Findings and Discussion

Although this was not the intention, the descriptor tool at the book’s closure effectively knots together the themes running through the book, summarises our central argument and answers the question ‘where do we begin to formulate a good pedagogy for generic doctoral support?’. From here, we deal with each of these seven themes individually in no particular order:

Strong student evaluation of generic workshops

Institutions should recognize that student feedback is significant, because doctoral students are critical thinkers whose evaluation can be trusted. So it is good practice to evaluate generic sessions regularly for both formative and summative purposes. Unsolicited emails confirming value also signal beyond reasonable doubt that the sessions are found to be worthwhile. This is especially so when it comes from students who say they might otherwise have dropped out, were it not for the generic support they received. Attrition-prevention has a cash value in terms of government funding for successful completion.

Sound teaching practice

Teaching generic sessions needs to be strong, reflective, and careful because many of the doctoral students who attend are likely to become teachers. It is a modelling exercise. Moreover, generic advisors are more exposed to the scrutiny of the wider academy than most academics. In the words of the practitioners in our sample, classes should be ‘*interactive*’, with discussion that ‘*engage[s] students with their research.*’ They must ‘*provide safe scaffolding*’ for the wide variety of students who attend, by being aware of disciplinary

difference, and of a wide range of methodologies. They should also be aware of ‘*non-western frameworks*.’

Generic expertise must be ‘*relevant to all students (e.g., not just those in Social Science)*’. Perhaps most valuable is where generic sessions are also ‘*practical and useful*’; ‘*provide tools*’; and ‘*use good examples and models*.’ By focussing on the generic nature of the doctorate, we are often able to provide models, examples and tools from the literature more extensively than most supervisors. Accordingly, the generic overview carves out a research niche and establishes our specific contribution to doctoral process.

Generic perspective giving clear overview of doctorate

Good generic support takes advantage of breadth of perspective. It ‘*gives larger context*’ and the ‘*conceptual framework*.’ Generic advisors make use of their own discipline crossing experiences to support student cross-disciplinarity, ‘*cater[ing]s for multiple paradigms*,’ and facilitating ‘*collaboration across disciplines [that] shows students their own disciplines more clearly*.’ In considering graduate skills and attributes, generic support ‘*shows the context for skills*’ and ‘*shows contingency of academic work*.’ By enabling talk about the framework of the doctorate, generic sessions make it possible for participants to establish graduate attributes (such as the ability to contextualize, and to work flexibly and interdisciplinarily when needed). Again, the generic focus is more likely to achieve this work than discipline-specific workshops; the purposes of the departmental and the generic are different and complementary. We need to get better at articulating the generic perspective, and staking a claim to our expertise.

Approach useful for students’ future

It is crucial that generic support ‘*teaches transferable skills*’; ‘*provides professional development*’; ‘*opens multiple career possibility*’; and ‘*helps students to realize their fullest potential*.’ Evidence of this is longitudinal and it is difficult for individual generic learning advisors to claim agency with this one. Nevertheless, it remains a vital criterion for measuring good teaching.

Community of practice collegiality

Generic support that ‘*validates student experience*’; ‘*shares insider information*’; ‘*shares experience*’; and ‘*supports students for their relationships with supervisors and other academics*’ contributes to institutional desire for successful doctoral completions. If an increased sense of engagement and support from generic classes prevents just a few doctoral students from dropping out each year, and means more of our doctoral graduates will speak well of their experience with us, with word-of-mouth being a most effective advertisement, then the university benefits financially. At the same time, it meets its social responsibilities of care to students.

Enablement of students’ identity transformation

Throughout our book, we note that progression through the doctorate causes a transformation of identity from student to novice independent researcher, and that this transformation, as literature confirms (Kamler & Thompson, 2009), is sometimes troublesome. Doctoral study entails deep level learning (Marton & Saljo, 1976) and threshold crossing (Kiley & Wisker, 2009; Wisker & Robinson, 2009). Good generic doctoral support ‘*helps students to find their sense of self*’, ‘*to become reflexive*’, and ‘*to develop critical abilities*.’ It should aim to be ‘*mind expanding*’, to ‘*stretch students*’, helping them move ‘*away from the possible dependency of supervision*’, and it should ‘*teach students to think for themselves*’ and ‘*raise what Swales terms ‘rhetorical consciousness*’. Awareness of the generic requirements of the

doctorate (*'the abilities to synthesise, argue, write, and manage time'*), and familiarity with multiple successful theses, equips learning advisors to guide students towards satisfying these requirements, as well as safely *'encourag[ing] innovation'* for those wishing to step outside the conventional.

Establishes academic citizenship

Generic support has the potential to *'develop understanding'* and *'respect'* through its community of practice cross-disciplinary work. At its core, it must be *'inclusive'* and guard *'against threats to freedom of thought'* so that it *'develops students to take action as social watchdogs.'* This will be more true of some disciplines and some students, but it is a crucial dimension of universities' function, especially when financial and ecological challenges add tensions likely to destabilize societies.

Practical implications

For too long, the provision of generic support has been seen as an ad hoc response to demand, rather than as a vital complement to formal disciplinary supervision. If the rhetoric of graduate attributes and about equal access to support are to come to fruition, generic support has a significant role to play—such teaching and learning work is best done in generic situation. If the increasing pressures on academics puts supervision under time constraints, generic support can alleviate the pressure by giving doctoral students access to academics who are experts in thesis writings' practice and generic expectations.

Central support is vulnerable to cost-cutting. We urge others to take up the imperative to research their practice as a survival tactic in an age of managerialism. It is important that we work together to consider how we can show our value as individuals and as centres or support units. In this paper we have presented one tool for doing so, a short terse list of points condensed from experts' thinking on what the criteria might be for good generic support:

- Strong student evaluation
- Sound teaching practice
- Generic perspective giving clear overview of doctorate
- Approach useful for students' future
- Community of practice collegiality
- Enablement of students' identity transformation
- Establishes academic citizenship

We would ask participants to consider how to perhaps strengthen this tool for assessment and develop others that might allow us to confirm the contribution of generic support beyond reasonable doubt. The only way to test these criteria will be to apply them in practice. We also ask that others ways to more accurately, securely locate the proper perimeters of generic support as it complements supervision, establish its area of expertise and best fit within institutional placement and seek ways to show its value.

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